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Interrogative sentences and their functions in Russian  
and American political discourse: a comparative analysis

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**Abstract.** Despite the vast research on questions in linguistics, little is known about their functioning in political discourse. So the paper considers questions, their types and functions in political discourse. We pay attention to polar, embedded and non-canonical questions (rhetorical, tag, declarative, special and echo questions), and study their functions depending on discourse participants' intentions. We also make a qualitative and quantitative analysis and compare the use of questions by V. Putin (Russia) and J. Biden (USA) in interviews to TV channels and during press conferences in order to identify types of questions asked by both presidents and journalists, their functions and connection of the proposed meaning of questions and their interpretation in 60 fragments of political discourse. The study shows that four types of questions are typical for political discourse of Russia and the USA: polar (10% and 34.5%), rhetorical (60% and 65.5%), special (15% and 0%) and echo questions (15% and 0%). Unlike their proposed meaning, polar questions are structured so that the interviewer can get a preferred response; echo questions are aimed at drawing the attention of journalists and the audience to certain parts or expressing negative emotions; rhetorical questions are used by politicians to make the audience think about specific facts, events or consequences or highlight the role of the country on the world arena. Special questions are asked to get accurate information that coincides with their original connotation. The results obtained are promising for further study of the functioning of questions in the speech of politicians.

**Keywords:** Intention; Interaction; Linguistic research; Political discourse; Question

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Функции вопросительных предложений в русском  
и американском политическом дискурсе:  
сравнительный анализ

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**Аннотация.** Несмотря на обширные исследования вопросительных предложений в лингвистике, мало известно об их функционировании в политическом дискурсе. Термины «вопрос» и «вопросительное предложение» также вызывают споры, хотя несколько лет назад наметилась тенденция к использованию первого в семантике и прагматике, а второго в синтаксисе. На основе этого данная работа рассматривает вопросы, их типы, функции и роль в политическом дискурсе. Мы обращаем внимание на такие виды вопросов, как полярные, встроенные, неканонические вопросы, включающие риторические, разделительные, декларативные, специальные и эхо-вопросы, рассматриваем их функции в зависимости от интенций участников дискурса и проводим качественный и количественный анализ и сравнение использования вопросов в интервью телевизионным каналам, а также во время пресс-конференций президентом РФ В. В. Путиным и президентом США Дж. Байденом с целью выявления типов вопросов, задаваемых обоими президентами, а также журналистами, их функций и связи предполагаемой коннотации вопросов и их интерпретации в 60 фрагментах политического дискурса. Проведенное исследование показывает, что 4 вида вопросов типичны для политического дискурса России и США: полярные (10% и 34,5%), риторические (60% и 65,5%), специальные (15% и 0%) и эхо-вопросы (15% и 0%). В отличие от своей предполагаемой коннотации, полярные вопросы структурированы так, чтобы получить предпочтительный для задающего ответ; эхо вопросы нацелены на акцентирование внимания журналистов и аудитории на определенные моменты или выражение негативных эмоций; риторические вопросы необходимы политикам для привлечения внимания аудитории к фактам, событиям, последствиям или подчеркивания роли страны на мировой арене. Специальные вопросы задают для получения конкретной информации и это совпадает с их изначальной коннотацией. Полученные результаты перспективны для дальнейшего изучения функционирования вопросов в речи политиков.

**Ключевые слова:** Вопрос; Интенция; Интеракция; Лингвистическое исследование; Политический дискурс

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## Introduction

Interrogative sentences have been the focus of linguistic research for a long time (Karttunen, 1977; Heritage et al., 1985; Black, 1992; Huddleston, 1994; Mithun, 2012; Agbara, 2016; Dayal, 2016; Arita,

2021). It is evident that questions are typical for any person's life. People can ask questions often without thinking about the consequences they can cause or vice versa. For instance, there may be questions that influence public opinion on some problem or

encourage recipients to reply in a way that is profitable for some party, or aggressive questions on the part of journalists (Watson, 2020). The terms “*question*” and “*interrogative*” themselves have been debated for a long time regarding the fact that both of them are equally used in syntax but there was a tendency several years ago to treat “*interrogative*” as a syntactic term and “*question*” as a semantic and pragmatic term (Jespersen, 1924; Huddleston, 1994).

Interrogative sentences are multi-functional and can be used for different purposes depending on the type of discourse they refer to. Functions of questions in discourse are still a relevant problem for such areas as theoretical linguistics in general and pragmatics in particular. They are studied in relation to intonation and lexical or syntactic marking although many aspects have not been researched yet especially those concerning categories of questions and speakers’ intentions in the process of using interrogative sentences (Hautli-Janisz et al., 2021).

Political discourse is not an exception. From the point of view of linguistics, the former is centered around political communication, its strategies and tactics, genres of political speech, political phraseology and terminology, political spheres and its levels, political texts and political language (Chudinov, 2006; Chilton, 2004; van Dijk, 2002; Fetzer, 2002; Eisenberg, Gamble, 1991; Hague et al., 1998; Roseman et al., 1986). The interaction between participants of political discourse is quite versatile and its success is stipulated by many factors, one of which is the proper use of political language as well as strategies. Thus, it is interesting to consider questions and their functions as one of the strategies chosen by politicians in general and political leaders in particular.

It should be noted that questions can be examined from different angles:

- their types and functions;
- speakers using questions in their speech;

- recipients comprehending questions and replying to them;

- participants of political discourse interacting with each other and using questions as part of the interaction.

#### **Types of questions and their functions**

In general, questions are considered to be “a quintessential interface phenomenon” (Dayal, 2016: 1). Syntax, pragmatics and semantics are the aspects that are taken into account when questions must be defined. According to the Cambridge Dictionary *question* is interpreted as “anything we write or say which requires a response”<sup>1</sup>. It is asserted that any interrogative sentence is some canonical form required when information is needed and it is quite important to understand the relationship between “the interrogative form and the speech act of questioning” (Dayal, 2016: 2). As I. Koshik claims questions are often asked to convey assertions instead of seeking new information that is supposed to be one of the main functions of questions. And in this way such questions constitute live conversations when recipients’ answers show how well the latter understand some types of actions that these questions are related to (Koshik, 2005). It is worth paying attention to the idea that question forms can be used not only for questioning but also for other actions. At the same time, questioning can be done not only by questions themselves but other linguistic forms as well (Schegloff, 1984).

Thus, questions are dealt with as both syntactic forms and as an activity (Heritage and Roth, 1995; Schegloff, 1984). According to J. Heritage, a speaker cannot pronounce a meaningful phrase until he/she completes the sentence with that lexicon and prosody that are adapted to the individual identity of the recipient and allow the speaker to presume that the recipient knows some information and therefore it is possible to openly presume that (Heritage, 2012). It must be added that any interaction is based on the cognitive

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<sup>1</sup> Cambridge dictionary, retrieved from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org>

relationship that participants of discourse have. And it is evident that this relationship can be changed and adapted to the specifics of the situation during any conversation. However, the relationship is thought to be extrasituational relying on the information participants of discourse have about the information each of them has concerning the world or some state of affairs (Goffman, 1983).

So, if the speaker asks the recipient about something, the speech act usually covers several propositions:

- the speaker does not know the truth about the issue under consideration;
- the speaker wants to learn the truth about the issue under consideration;
- the speaker believes the recipient knows the truth about the issue under consideration (Dayal, 2016).

There are several theories concerning different approaches to the semantics of interrogative sentences. According to one of them, which is the earliest and well-known theory, it is claimed that a question is a set of propositions that provide possible answers to it (Hamblin, 1970).

The following types of questions are focused on in theoretical linguistics:

- polar questions;
- embedded questions;
- non-canonical questions (Dayal, 2016).

Polar questions or yes/no questions are considered to be one of the most persuasive techniques in interaction as they are widely used to distribute knowledge and information in all spheres of human activity. Producing such questions speakers usually expect a “yes” or “no” response but it is possible for them to structure their questions in such a way that recipients can choose the preferable answer for speakers (Raymond, 2003).

For example,

*<Can you give me the information about this conference?>*

The preferred and expected answer to this request is “yes”. However, the speaker can alter the question and ask it as follows:

*<You can't give me the information about this conference, can you?>*

The request is still embodied into the question, but the expected response is “no” (ibid.).

It should be noted that the use of appropriate techniques is the initiative and choice of the speakers, but their main purpose is to produce preferred responses, restraining at the same time undesirable responses (Heritage, 1984). It is argued that the grammatical structure of polar questions formed with the help of putting the auxiliary verb, the needed form of the verb “do” or some modal verb before the subject provides for the relevant choice between “yes” and “no” (Raymond, 2003). Such responses whether they are preferred or dispreferred are called “type-conforming responses” whereas there can be situations when recipients make a decision to “avoid the constraints set in motion by the grammatical form” of the question saying neither “yes” nor “no” and they form “nonconforming responses” (Raymond, 2003: 946).

G. Raymond also states that type-conforming responses are more frequently used than nonconforming responses which are caused by specific situations (ibid.).

Furthermore, a yes-no question or its embedded variant implies some propositions. For example:

*<Did they go abroad last year?>* or its variant *<Do you know if they went abroad last year?>* implies propositions that *<they went abroad last year>* and *<they did not go abroad last year>* as well as *<Yes I do>*, *<No, I do not know>*. In this case these propositions are considered to be the true ones and they comprise the model suggested by L. Karttunen (1977) unlike Hamblin’s model that supposes all sorts of propositions not only the true ones. For example,

*<Who read that paper?>* or its embedded option *<Can you tell me who read that paper?>*. There can be such responses as: *<X read it>*, *<Y read it>* and a multitude of the same replies, and the true answers: *<Yes, I can>*, *<No, I cannot>*.

It should be added that some verbs in embedded questions can use the content of the interrogative sentence as their argument, for instance, *<ask>* and *<wonder>*, and they are called “question-embedding” verbs while the verbs *<know>* and *<tell>* insert the responses to questions therefore the argument of the verb can serve as a proposition that provides the answer to the question (Ginzburg, 1991).

Moreover, besides the types of embedded questions examined above there are questions made up in accordance with the following model with the verb *<know>*: *<Steve knows whose report this is>*. It implies that *if Steve knows whose report this is*, he believes that he really knows that. But if none of the people whom Steve knows wrote this report, the proposition turns out to be empty. So it is claimed that two cases should be considered here: when the proposition is not empty, *<know>* works as before, and when it is empty, it is necessary to meet an additional requirement that stipulates one’s belief in the proposition being empty (Heim, 1994).

Non-canonical questions include such types that deviate from conventional standards, e.g. declarative questions, echo questions, rhetorical and tag questions etc.

The issue of non-canonical questions itself is an interesting and complicated phenomenon in linguistics as these questions are rather challenging. To begin with, a rhetorical question, for example, is defined as “a question, asked in order to make a statement that does not expect an answer” (The Cambridge Dictionary). Although it is argued that this question is sometimes asked to get some answer and it is regarded as socially mandating, that is why the reply may be chosen from a limited number of responses including a reply itself or an evasion or a recipient can admit his/her lack of knowledge on the issue under consideration. It is also stated that a rhetorical question has a clear persuasive effect (Black, 1992).

Besides, rhetorical questions are described as questions that have the ability to convey negative assertions in case there are some kinds of negative environments and

negative polarity items such as “*ever*”, “*any*” etc. are used, e.g.

*<Who has ever defended this person?>*

The speaker initially implies the negative response: “*No one*” (Horn, 1978).

A rhetorical question might be “so profound that answering it is obviously impossible or so superficial that answering it is impossibly obvious” (Black, 1992: 2). Moreover, this type of questions is often associated with the specific intonation pattern. Then it can be definitely considered to be an assertion rather than a request for information (Gutierrez-Rexach, 1998).

No less problematic are declarative questions that are interpreted as statements “with final rising question intonation” (Quirk et al., 1985: 814). However, it is argued that intonation cannot be the main indicator of this type of questions as there are declarative clauses with rising intonation that do not have functions of questions in some conversations (Bolinger, 1989). So, it is up to recipients to identify the appropriate function of the declarative clause in every case. E. Weber proposes that speakers mark declarative sentences somehow while producing them in real time, thus, elements of declaratives possess some order which is perceived by participants of discourse who understand whether it is a question or a statement (Weber, 1993). It should be also noted that some conjunctions, adverbs and discourse particles such as “*because*”, “*but*”, “*well*”, “*then*”, “*oh*”, “*if*” etc. are distinguished as markers of declarative questions. They can be used separately and together with other elements that help interpret the clause as doing questioning, e.g. *<well, if you don’t want me to help you>* (ibid.).

One more interesting aspect regarding declarative questions is their formation with the help of some particles or words at the end of a clause, e.g. *<they didn’t do it, huh>*. Furthermore, it is stated that declarative questions can be marked in three different ways, namely:

- marking within the declarative sentence;



- marking prior to the declarative sentence;
- marking subsequent to the declarative sentence (Weber, 1993).

It is also clear that speakers expect to get affirmative answers to most declarative questions due to the fact that participants of discourse asking such questions simply want to confirm some facts that they already know or draw recipients' attention to some points (Penz, 1996).

Turning to tag questions it should be noted that their interpretation is not a debated aspect and it is evident that these are "utterances with an interrogative tag" (Kimps, 2018: 1). It is claimed that tag questions can be dependent or independent from the point of view of their grammar. For example, <*The PM's report was short, wasn't it?*> or <*They left for Italy last month, didn't they?*> are dependent questions; <*You know this fact very well, is that right?*> or <*You are good at public speaking, eh?*> are independent questions. The last variant is close to declarative questions considered above.

It is believed that questions of this type have two kinds of meanings: interactional and stance. The former meaning implies some interactional position a speaker has in discourse and some response that he/she expects from a recipient (McGregor, 1997). The latter focuses on the influence of tags on the relation between the main part of tag questions and expectations and attitudes of participants of discourse (ibid.). Much attention is paid to intonation as a formal indicator that affects basic meaning differences. Thus, tag questions pronounced with the rising intonation on the tag imply some doubt causing the recipient to decide if the information given in the main part is true or not. And in this case they are considered to be biased concerning the polarity of the main part. On the contrary, if the tag is pronounced with the falling tone, the speaker has no doubts about the information in the main part and the recipient is supposed to confirm it and as a result, such questions are thought not to be real questions (Quirk et al., 1985).

So, questions play different functions in any discourse and the choice of the appropriate question type depends on participants of this discourse, their objectives, suppositions concerning knowledge of needed information on the part of other participants and intentions. According to A. Hautli-Janisz et al., intentions also vary regarding both discourse and participants but their four types are suggested:

- pure questioning (speakers expect recipients to give necessary information);
- challenge questioning (speakers ask recipients to prove their point of view);
- rhetorical questioning (speakers make assertions implying questions);
- assertive questioning (speakers ask recipients to express their point of view on some topic and simultaneously give their own opinion publicly) (Hautli-Janisz et al., 2022).

It is evident that speakers' intentions are interconnected with questions and their types and functioning of the latter in any discourse is crucial, serving various purposes. As our study is aimed at political discourse and the use of questions there, it is important to focus on its main participants.

### **Questions in political discourse**

The key participant or actor of political discourse is a politician. It is asserted that politicians have all abilities and opportunities to modify and even challenge those ideologies that they share with their audiences. To do this they use different linguistic tools including questions that they ask to achieve a success in their interaction with other participants of political discourse, namely, ordinary people, representatives of political groups and institutions, journalists etc. (Reyes, 2011).

It is interesting to note that politicians can even play different roles, among which the roles of narrators, interlocutors, characters are distinguished. The roles are needed to establish contacts with other participants of discourse, to create a good image of themselves or align with famous and respected people. The narrator role is the most frequently played one as it is necessary for politicians to present some information (facts,

events, analysis etc.) and prove it. The interlocutor role requires the use of questions first of all that help build rapport with the audience and in many cases create a relaxed atmosphere. The role of a character is essential when politicians want to resemble well-known public figures and quote them (ibid.).

However, in our opinion, it is quite controversial to say that questions are used only for performing the interlocutor role as all other roles can provide for questioning. Furthermore, politicians can perform several roles simultaneously. And it is not surprising that many politicians are famous due to their use of language means to control and guide their audiences (Reyes, 2011).

The problem of intentionality on the part of politicians is also relevant. The main challenge is that politicians' speeches can often be spontaneous and that prevents recipients from understanding their true intentions. Moreover, recipients can interpret a politician's words incorrectly. To avoid this, most politicians try to prepare for delivering a talk even if it is an interview despite the fact that spontaneous actions are practically inevitable in this case. So meditation and premeditation are thought to be significant in the process of preparing a speech that can contain questions as part of the communicative strategy. It is claimed that politicians refer to questions when they want to interact with the audience and questions themselves serve as markers of the tone and familiarity of the speech event (ibid.).

In this regard, it is interesting to analyze the use of questions in the interviews to TV channels and during press conferences given by political leaders, namely the president of the Russian Federation V. Putin and the president of the United States of America J. Biden. The analysis is aimed at the identification of questions types, their functions and intentions of the presidents as well as the consideration of questions asked by journalists since it is necessary to trace the connection between the meaning proposed by

a specific type of question and its interpretation within discourse.

### **The analysis of questions in Russian political discourse**

In the course of the press conference that took place on December 23, 2021, one of the representatives of the agency "Interfax" asked V.V. Putin the questions:

*"В связи с тем, что Вы сказали, что Вы будете говорить о том, как будет развиваться экономика, – мир эти два года вёл всемирную «войну» с коронавирусом, а сейчас будет с «омикроном», вероятно. Как затронула эта война экономику России? А она практически затронула всех людей. Как выбираться из этого экономического кризиса, из этой ямы, какие драйверы? Надо ли ожидать полную вакцинацию населения, чтобы говорить о возможности успешного развития экономики?"*<sup>2</sup>.

The underlined questions *<Как затронула эта война экономику России?>*, *<Как выбираться из этого экономического кризиса, из этой ямы, какие драйверы?>* refer to open-type questions, according to Russian Grammar, and correspond to special questions in English Grammar. They are asked in such a way that it is clear that the journalist expects the president's justification of the negative fact that the country has an economic crisis and "the war" has affected the economy badly, but he hopes that V. Putin can propose some ways out of this situation. The third question *<Надо ли ожидать полную вакцинацию населения, чтобы говорить о возможности успешного развития экономики?>* is a close-type question or polar question and it implies the positive response being connected with the previous questions focusing on the economic crisis and ways out of it.

In his reply V. Putin used questions:

<sup>2</sup> *Bol'shaya press-konferenciya Vladimira Putina ot 23.12.2021 [The big press-conference of V. Putin of 23.12.2021]*, retrieved from <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67438>

“Да, теперь драйверы роста. Вы сказали: **какие драйверы роста? И по поводу вакцинации – полная, неполная нужна?**”<sup>3</sup>.

The first question <**какие драйверы роста?**> is an echo question that gives the president an opportunity to buy some time and think about the information to be presented. The second question <**полная, неполная нужна?**> refers to an alternative question although it is partly an echo question. The president tries to meditate in the process of giving a reply and evaluate all pros and cons of vaccination.

One more fragment of the Russian president's reply to the above question about vaccination:

“И наконец, ещё один Ваш вопрос касается полной вакцинации. У нас, к сожалению, так же, как во многих других странах, – возьмите некоторые европейские страны, они тоже переживают по поводу того, что низкий уровень вакцинации, – скажем, в Федеративной Республике Германия, в стране с очень хорошо развитой системой здравоохранения, хотя и там тоже много критики в адрес системы здравоохранения, но всё-таки одна из наиболее эффективных систем в Европе, – низкий уровень. У нас он какой? 59,4 процента на сегодняшний день...”<sup>4</sup>.

The question <**У нас он какой?**> is a special question that is asked to understand if the audience knows some figures and statistics and confirm the data the president has about the level of vaccination in the Russian Federation.

Another journalist asked V. Putin the following question:

“В целом как бы Вы охарактеризовали новый бюджет: как бюджет развития или социально ориентированный бюджет?”<sup>5</sup>

This is again a special question but it contains the part where the president is given two options between which he can choose <**как бюджет развития или социально ориентированный бюджет**> thus it forces the president to consider only two options although he can have a different point of view on this problem and more than two options for characterizing the budget. So the journalist wishes to impose restrictions on the president in this area and look at his reaction.

In his response to the questions V. Putin said, “Во-первых, **какого качества бюджет?** Конечно, это социально ориентированный бюджет. Конечно.”<sup>6</sup>

The president uses the question <**какого качества бюджет?**> that refers to special questions to draw the journalists' attention to the specific aspect and that is <качество> and based on this he chooses the second option <**это социально ориентированный бюджет**>.

Some more questions on the part of journalists:

“**Как Вы оцениваете работу региональных руководителей?** Они на фоне пандемии получили очень большие полномочия и по-разному ими распорядились, вводили разного рода ограничения. **Как Вы думаете, насколько они удачно это делали, и какую бы Вы оценку им поставили?**”<sup>7</sup>

The underlined questions are ordinary special questions that require specific information.

V. Putin replied:

“На самом деле, мы же первые об этом сказали, что страна большая, ситуация в разных регионах разная, по-разному складывается, и поэтому при общем руководстве со стороны федерального центра – и для этого была создана правительственная комиссия – нам нужно всё-таки отдать на уровне регионов возможность тонко регулировать ситуацию в самом регионе.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



**Разве можно сравнить, я не знаю, Чукотку и Москву?**"<sup>8</sup>

The question **<Разве можно сравнить, я не знаю, Чукотку и Москву?>** is a polar question that can be considered to be rhetorical and the president expects the "no" answer to it as it is implied in the content of the question and the president's intonation. The positive response in this case would be dispreferred.

Let us consider one more fragment of the discourse. The journalist asked:

**"... Может быть, ввести какие-то уголовные наказания для тех, кто призывает не ходить к докторам? Просто я знаю, Владимир Владимирович, о чём подумал? Я вспоминаю Ваши заявления о том, что России очень тяжело, нас окружают и всё такое. Мы не можем сейчас, по-моему, позволить, мы и в другие времена не можем этого позволить, чтобы тысячи человек гибли каждый день. ...Может быть, нужна какая-то политическая воля руководства страны. Мы Вас поддержим, Владимир Владимирович. Вы поняли, о чём я говорю."**<sup>9</sup>

It is interesting to note that one and the same issue is raised several times and it is the current pandemic which is undoubtedly relevant. The journalist's questions **<Может быть, ввести какие-то уголовные наказания для тех, кто призывает не ходить к докторам?>**, **<Просто я знаю, Владимир Владимирович, о чём подумал?>** represent in fact his meditation process and the efforts to find a possible way out of the situation together with the president. The statement **<Может быть, нужна какая-то политическая воля руководства страны>** is a rhetorical question with the proposition that certain actions on the part of the government and the president are needed to improve the situation and what is more, compulsory vaccination is meant here.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

V. Putin gave the following answer:

**"Вы знаете, это просто ужасно, но здесь, что касается смертности от ковида, это сложно посчитать. Не потому, что кто-то чего-то пытается скрыть, совсем нет... Нужно ли вводить какие-то меры преследования на этот счёт? Я думаю, что нет."**<sup>10</sup>

The underlined question **<Нужно ли вводить какие-то меры преследования на этот счёт?>** is a polar and rhetorical question at the same time that suggests the negative response and the president himself answers it negatively **<Я думаю, что нет>**. V. Putin tries to explain to the audience the reasons which prevent the president and the government from imposing compulsory vaccination in the country.

In the next fragment of political discourse the Russian president replied to the questions about the possibilities of the war between Russia and NATO in the following way:

**"Но что произошло в 2014 году? Госпереворот кровавый, людей убивали и сжигали. Сейчас я не говорю, кто прав, кто виноват. .... Я разговаривал тогда с Президентом США по его инициативе. Он меня попросил тоже поддержать этот процесс. Все согласились. Через день, через два – госпереворот. Зачем? Ответа нет. Ну зачем? Президент Янукович и так со всем согласился, он готов был уйти хоть завтра от власти. Выборы – победа оппозиции была неминуема, это все прекрасно понимали. Ну зачем это сделали?"**<sup>11</sup>

The first question **<Но что произошло в 2014 году?>** is a special question but it is asked not to seek information from the audience but to make participants of the conference remember that period. The president himself gives the answer **<Госпереворот кровавый, людей убивали и сжигали>**. The other three questions **<Зачем?>**, **<Ну зачем?>**, **<Ну**

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

*зачем это сделали?*> are rhetorical questions. V. Putin does not expect any answers but again wants journalists to think about the reasons of actions at that time. The repetition of the question <*Ну зачем?*> that is strengthened with the interjection <*ну*> makes these questions more forceful underlining the implied absurdity of the actions taken.

In the next fragment of political discourse K. Simmons, an American journalist of the TV company NBC asked the Russian president:

*“Начну вот с чего. Сегодня пришли новости из США, там заявляют, что в течение следующих нескольких месяцев Россия готовит новые взломы военных объектов для иранской ядерной программы. Это правда?”*<sup>12</sup>

It is evident that the tone used by the American journalist differs from what was observed in the previous fragments when Russian journalists asked questions. The former is more aggressive and direct. So is the question <*Это правда?*>. This is a polar question that implies only two options: “yes” or “no” and thus requires no evasion on the part of the Russian president.

V. Putin’s response was as follows:

*“Ещё раз повторите, пожалуйста, вопрос: мы готовим взломы каких объектов?”*<sup>13</sup>

The question <*мы готовим взломы каких объектов?*> is an echo question. V. Putin understands the tone of the American journalist and asks this question in order to draw Simmons’ attention to the objects that are under consideration. The Russian president pretends to be surprised at the term <*военных объектов*> and makes the journalist repeat his question highlighting these very objects as Russia in fact is not planning any actions in this area.

K. Simmons continued the interview with the question:

<sup>12</sup> *Interv’yu amerikanskoj telekompanii NBC ot 14.06.2021 [The interview to the American TV company NBC of 14.06.2021]*, retrieved from <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/presidentnews/65861>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

*“То есть Вы согласны с тем, что передать Ирану такие спутниковые технологии – это поставило бы под угрозу американских военнослужащих, получи Иран от России такие технологии, ведь они могли бы передавать такую информацию хуситам в Йемене, могли передавать информацию «Хезболле».”*<sup>14</sup>

This is thought to be a tag-question with the difference that the tag is only implied here and the question is direct and aggressive again.

In his reply the Russian president said:

*“Послушайте, что мы обсуждаем проблемы, которых не существует? Нет предмета для обсуждений. Кто-то что-то выдумывает, я не знаю, может, это вброс, связанный с тем, чтобы вообще ограничить любое военно-техническое сотрудничество с Ираном.”*<sup>15</sup>

The underlined question <*что мы обсуждаем проблемы, которых не существует?*> refers to the type of special questions. However, the president asks it as a rhetorical question without expecting any reply on the journalist’s part. V. Putin is sure that there are no such problems that is why he says <*Нет предмета для обсуждений*>. And he intends to assure the American journalist of this <*Кто-то что-то выдумывает, я не знаю, может, это вброс, связанный с тем, чтобы вообще ограничить любое военно-техническое сотрудничество с Ираном*>.

In the interview to the TV channel CNBC V. Putin was asked:

*“Несколько месяцев назад господин Новак предположил, что мы скоро увидим контракты на поставки нефти не в долларах, а в других валютах, возможно, даже в криптовалюте. Когда это может случиться, как Вы думаете?”*<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> *Interv’yu telekanalu CNBC ot 14.10.2021 [The interview to the TV channel CNBC of 14.10.2021]*, retrieved from <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66920>

Despite the fact that the journalist represents the American TV channel, the tone does not resemble the one that was used in the previous interview to the American TV channel. Consequently, the question *<Когда это может случиться, как Вы думаете?>* is pronounced in a different way and not so directly. This is an embedded variant of the special question aimed at receiving some definite answer.

The president of the Russian Federation replied:

*“Контракты в криптовалюте? Пока об этом рано говорить, потому что криптовалюта, конечно, может быть расчётной единицей, но она очень нестабильна.”*<sup>17</sup>

The question *<Контракты в криптовалюте?>* refers to an echo question. It is asked to clarify the understanding of the journalist’s question and buy some time to think about the issue.

The next question of the American journalist was:

*“То есть Вы считаете, что это ничего не значит, и такие люди, как Илон Маск, то, что у них есть, это всё ничего не стоит?”*<sup>18</sup>

This is a polar question that implies the confirmation of the fact *<это всё ничего не стоит>*. It should be added that the question is quite provocative as it contains the information about the person known all over the world, so the Russian president’s reaction will be analyzed in detail afterwards and it is needed to be cautious.

V. Putin reacted in the following way:

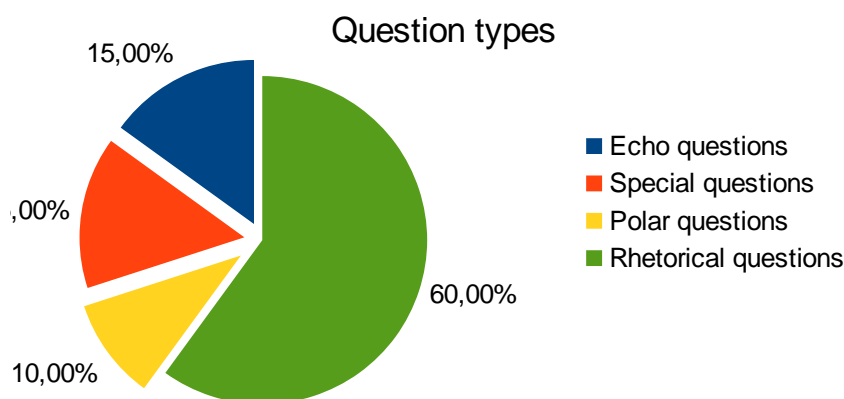
*“Почему же? Это стоит. Просто можно ли это использовать в качестве расчётной единицы при купле-продаже нефти? Вот о чём я говорю.”*<sup>19</sup>

The first question *<Почему же?>* is informal as it has the particle *<же>* and it is considered to be a rhetorical question as well as the second question *<Просто можно ли это использовать в качестве расчётной единицы при купле-продаже нефти?>* implying no answer, only intended to cause some consideration on the part of the interlocutor.

30 fragments of political discourse were analyzed in the same way. Using the qualitative and quantitative analyses we identified question types used by the Russian president and journalists. The results are presented in Fig. 1, 2.

**Figure 1.** Question types in Russian political discourse (on the part of the president)

**Рисунок 1.** Типы вопросов в российском политическом дискурсе (со стороны президента)

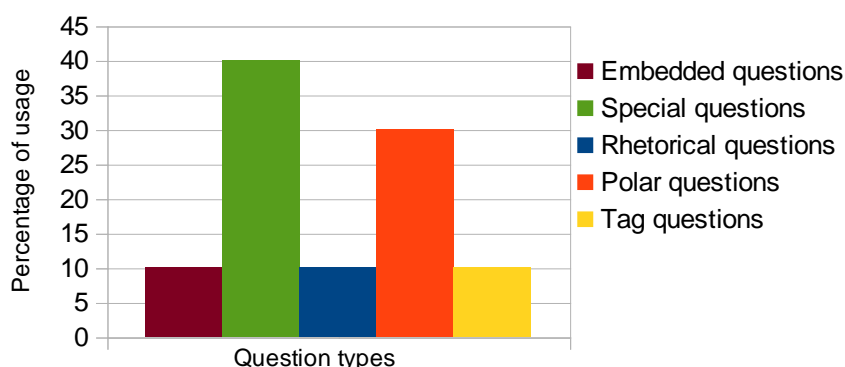


<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

**Figure 2.** Question types in Russian political discourse (on the part of journalists)  
**Рисунок 2.** Типы вопросов в российском политическом дискурсе (со стороны журналистов)



### The analysis of questions in American political discourse

George Stephanopoulos, a journalist representing the ABC News Corporation asked the president of the USA about one of the most relevant issues at the present moment, namely vaccination:

*“Every American eligible for the vaccine by -- adult American by May 1st. Something close to normal on July 4th. But tell everyone, when is everything going to be normal for Americans? ..... Would it help if president Trump told the Republican men to get a vaccine?”<sup>20</sup>* (ABC News’ George Stephanopoulos interviews president Joe Biden, 17.03.2021).

The question *<when is everything going to be normal for Americans?>* is a special question, it is direct and the journalist expects to get the information he needs. The next question *<Would it help if president Trump told the Republican men to get a vaccine?>* is a polar question that implies the confirmation of the fact that it is ex-president Trump’s responsibility to make the representatives of his party be vaccinated.

The American president replied:

<sup>20</sup> ABC News’ George Stephanopoulos interviews president Joe Biden of March 17, 2021, retrieved from <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/transcript-abc-news-george-stephanopoulos-interviews-president-joe/story?id=76509669>

*“I have no idea what kind of influence he has anymore. .... But I don’t quite understand, you know, the sorta -- I don’t wanna -- I just don’t understand this sort of macho thing about, “I’m not gonna get the vaccine. I have a right as an American, my freedom to not do it.” Well, why don’t you be a patriot? Protect other people.”<sup>21</sup>*

The question *<Well, why don’t you be a patriot?>* refers to a special question but is may be considered to be a rhetorical one as the American president does not need any answer to it but he wants every American to think about this problem.

In the next part of the same interview J. Biden was asked:

*“Let’s talk about the crisis at the border. Some heartbreaking scenes down there right now. ... It seems to be getting worse by the day. Was it a mistake not to anticipate this surge?”<sup>22</sup>*

The journalist puts forward the question *<Was it a mistake not to anticipate this surge?>* that is a polar question with the proposition of the agreement with the fact that the president made a mistake.

J. Biden’s response was as follows:

*“The adults are being sent back, number one. That’s number one. Number two,*

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



*what do you do with an unaccompanied child that comes to the border? Do you repeat what Trump did? Take them from their mothers, move them away, hold them in cells, etcetera?*"<sup>23</sup>

Asking his first question <*what do you do with an unaccompanied child that comes to the border?*> that is thought to be a rhetoric question the American president wants the journalist to think about the appropriate actions in this case. The second question <*Do you repeat what Trump did?*> is a polar question that implies the "no" answer and expresses the negative evaluation of Trump's policy concerning this problem. The same can be said about the third question <*Take them from their mothers, move them away, hold them in cells, etcetera?*> that is a rhetoric question again with the same connotation as the previous one.

Let us consider one more fragment of the interview. The journalist asked the following question:

*"It's going to take some time though to get those policies in place again. Do you have to say quite clearly, "Don't come"?"*<sup>24</sup>

G. Stephanopoulos uses the polar question <*Do you have to say quite clearly, "Don't come"?*> to press the president and make him admit the solution of the problem in such a way.

Instead J. Biden said:

*"It's not like someone's sitting in Guadalajara right now in Mexico, which is not the biggest problem right now, and saying, "I got a great idea. Let's sell everything we have, give it to a coyote, give him our kids, take 'em across the border. Leave 'em in a desert where they don't speak the language. Won't that be fun?"*"<sup>25</sup>

The president also refers to the polar question <*Won't that be fun?*> which is considered to be a rhetoric question aimed at challenging the interlocutor in this case.

The journalist also wished to focus on Biden's position and he said:

*"You probably walked into the Oval Office as president with -- about as much experience, if not more experience, than any other president who's ever served. ... So what is it about the job that surprised you, that even you didn't know?"*<sup>26</sup>

The special question <*So what is it about the job that surprised you, that even you didn't know?*> is asked to get true information from the president, who replied:

*"Well, there wasn't -- all the -- George, I was thinkin' about this. ... What I thought of was, you know, how do you compare yourself to George Washington and Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt?"*<sup>27</sup>

<*How do you compare yourself to George Washington and Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt?*> is a rhetoric question that J. Biden asks himself to assess his work and decisions compared to those of former presidents.

During one of the American president's press conferences J. Biden said:

*"Been a long day for y'all. I know it was easy getting into the pre-meeting. There was no problem getting through those doors. Was it? Was it?"*<sup>28</sup>

The president asks the polar question <*Was it?*> twice as he intends to get the "yes" answer knowing perfectly well that it was difficult for journalists to enter the meeting room.

In another part of this press conference J. Biden said:

*"Human rights is going to always be on the table," I told him. It's not about just going after Russia when they violate human rights. It's about who we are. How could I be the president of the United States of America*

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Joe Biden press conference transcript after meeting with Putin of June 16, 2021, retrieved from <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/joe-biden-press-conference-after-meeting-with-putin>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

*and not speak out against the violation of human rights?*"<sup>29</sup>

The president's question <*How could I be the president of the United States of America and not speak out against the violation of human rights?*> is a rhetoric question aimed at praising the policy of the USA and its pretended responsibility for all the people in the world.

Criticizing Putin J. Biden said:

*"Let's get this straight. How would it be if the United States were viewed by the rest of the world as interfering with the elections directly of other countries and everybody knew it? What would it be like if we engage in activities that he's engaged in?"*<sup>30</sup>

The underlined questions are rhetoric questions again and their target is like in the previous fragment of political discourse and that is glorification of America and drawing the attention of the audience to the fact that this is the most democratic country in the world, in Biden's opinion.

One more part of the press conference where the American president asked:

*"Look, would you like to trade our economy for Russia's economy? Would you like to trade?"*<sup>31</sup>

It is clear that the president likes to repeat the same questions to strengthen the effect of his words. So in this fragment the questions <*would you like to trade our economy for Russia's economy?*>, <*Would you like to trade?*> are polar questions asked with the intention to get the negative answers and the confirmation of Biden's beliefs in the superiority of his own country.

During one more press conference an American journalist asked the president:

*"COVID-19 is still taking the lives of 1,500 Americans every day and the nation's divisions are just as raw as they were a year ago. Did you overpromise to the American*

*public what you could achieve in your first year in office?"*<sup>32</sup>

The question <*Did you overpromise to the American public what you could achieve in your first year in office?*> still concerns the pandemic. It is a polar question and the proposed answer is "yes".

However, J. Biden gave the following reply:

*"Why you're such an optimist? Look, I didn't over promise and what I have probably outperformed what anybody thought would happen."*<sup>33</sup>

The president does not admit his mistakes asking instead the question <*Why you're such an optimist?*> that is a special question but it can be thought to be a rhetoric question as the president is sure that the journalist is a pessimist and does not expect any confirmation.

In the next fragment of the same political discourse the journalist said:

*"Speaking of voting rights legislation, if this isn't passed, do you still believe the upcoming election will be fairly conducted and its results will be legitimate?"*<sup>34</sup>

The underlined question refers to a polar question and the journalist intends to get the accurate information about the president's ideas concerning the issue under consideration.

The American president answered:

*"Well, it all depends on whether or not we're able to make the case to the American people that some of this is being set up to try to alter the outcome of the election. ... Remember how we thought not that many people were going to show up to vote in the middle of a pandemic?"*<sup>35</sup>

The question <*Remember how we thought not that many people were going to show up to vote in the middle of a*

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Press conference: Joe Biden holds a solo press conference at the White House – January 19, 2022, retrieved from <https://factba.se/biden/transcript/joe-biden-press-conference-first-year-january-19-2022>

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

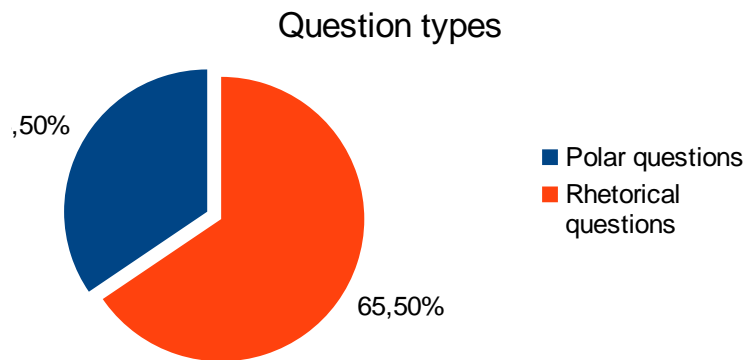
<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

*pandemic?*> is a polar question aimed at getting the positive reply and focusing on people's actions that can differ from expectations of the authorities.

We also examined 30 fragments of American political discourse and got the results shown in Fig. 3, 4.

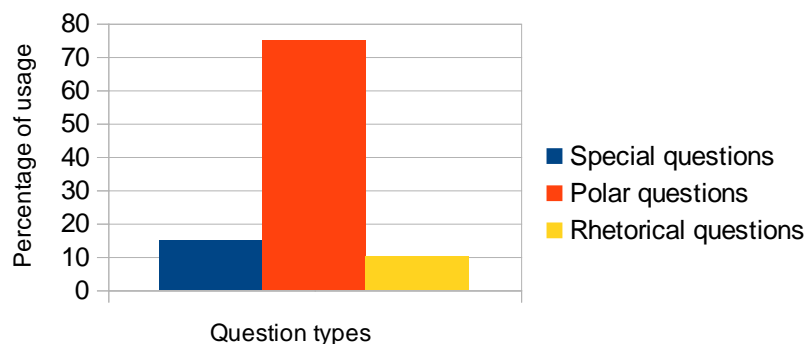
**Figure 3.** Question types in American political discourse (on the part of the president)

**Рисунок 3.** Типы вопросов в американском политическом дискурсе (со стороны президента)



**Figure 4.** Question types in American political discourse (on the part of journalists)

**Рисунок 4.** Типы вопросов в американском политическом дискурсе (со стороны журналистов)



### Results and discussion

The analysis of the question types used in Russian and American political discourse shows that the Russian president prefers different types of questions but rhetorical questions prevail in his speech (60%), whereas echo questions and special questions are asked on the equal basis (15% each) and polar questions comprise 10%. Unlike V. Putin, the American president does not refer to special and echo questions at all giving preference to rhetorical questions (65,5%) and polar questions (34,5%). Thus

rhetorical questions are used by the presidents of both countries in most cases although their functions can differ as V. Putin asks such questions to make the audience remember or think about some events or actions and the same can be said about J. Biden in some fragments but besides these episodes the American president uses rhetorical questions to highlight the superiority of the USA and its political system. J. Biden often asks polar questions aimed at getting the confirmation of some facts that he mentions whether negative or positive one while V. Putin seldom refers to

such questions as he has no wish to press anyone by the choice between two options one of which is strongly preferred by the president. It is interesting that V. Putin likes to repeat some questions either to challenge interlocutors or focus on some parts in their questions or buy some time to think about the appropriate answer. And special questions are asked in the same way and with the same intention.

It is rather surprising that journalists also use more types of questions in Russian political discourse, namely special questions (40%), polar questions (30%), rhetorical questions, tag and embedded questions (10% each). So they prefer special and polar questions to get specific and true information about some issues under consideration or give the political leader two options between which he can choose proposing some variant in most cases. On the contrary, polar questions prevail in American political discourse (75%) and special and rhetorical questions comprise only 15% and 10% correspondingly. We can suppose that it is due to the fact that journalists in the USA want to force the leader of the country to choose the preferred answer and then speculate on this topic.

### Conclusions

So, four types of questions are mostly used in the analyzed political discourse: polar, echo, special and rhetorical questions. The proposed meaning of *polar questions* is based on getting a “yes” or “no” answer but in the given fragments of discourse they are structured in such a way that only one option is considered to be the preferred one.

*Echo questions* imply the repetition of the information given above due to the fact that interviewees (presidents) have not heard the question well or misunderstood something. However, in the considered parts of political discourse they are asked to draw interviewers’ (journalists’) attention to some fact(s) they have mentioned, take some time to think over the possible reply or express certain emotions, e.g. surprise or anger, caused by the misinterpretation of some

information on the part of interlocutors (journalists in our study).

The meaning of *special questions* is related to specific information that interlocutors wish to get. In our case these questions are used with the same aim and intentions.

*Rhetorical questions* are asked as statements and interlocutors do not expect any answers. In the examined fragments of political discourse, they are used to make journalists or the audience remember or think about some event(s), actions taken at some period of time and their consequences or emphasize the position of some country in the world as well as its policy.

The results obtained may be useful for further analysis of questions and their functions in political discourse, since we focused only on interviews and press conferences, where presidents played the roles of both narrators and interlocutors, but it can be of interest to examine politicians’ speeches on different occasions and compare the proposed meaning of questions and their interpretation.

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**Конфликты интересов: у автора нет конфликта интересов для декларации.**

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